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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 009486

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/29/2014

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SUBJECT: IN JORDAN, CROWN PRINCES COME AND GO

Classified By: CDA David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

1. (C) In a surprise move, King Abdullah relieved his brother Hamza of his duties as Crown Prince on November 28, igniting speculation among Jordanians over the King's motives. The King did not name Hamza's replacement. Until he does so, the constitution provides that Abdullah's eldest son, ten-year-old Prince Hussein, now assumes the position. While many expected the King eventually to replace Hamza, many question the timing of the sudden announcement. Coming just months before Hamza graduates and returns to Jordan permanently, it appears to be an attempt by the King to preempt any drift of popularity to his appealing half-brother. Although it will exacerbate already frosty relations with Queen Noor and her offspring (and undoubtedly upset many ordinary Jordanians infatuated with Hamza), Abdullah's decision signals his growing sense of confidence. Others may interpret it as a sign of weakness that he feels threatened by Hamza, and the timing has been seen by some as premature in light of the venerated father's wish to bridge this particular family fault line. Royal Court Minister Rifai told us that there would be no designation of a new crown prince, as the King wanted all of his brothers and his son to develop independent careers and normal personalities without the weight of succession on their shoulders, and to avoid the fractiousness that can come with a named succession. End Summary and Comment.

KING "FREES" CROWN PRINCE FROM HIS DUTIES

2. (U) On November 28, Jordan's Royal Palace released a letter from King Abdullah to Prince Hamzah, relieving Hamza of his duties as Crown Prince. The letter argued with some contradiction that Hamza would be ready for other duties by being "freed from the constraints" of a position that is elsewhere in the letter described as symbolic, without authority or responsibility. The letter states that for five years Abdullah adhered to his father's wishes in keeping the CP position an "honorary" one, but seems to indicate that with this change, the nature of the position will also be amended. "I have been keen on explaining the true picture and embodying the substance, which is derived from the Constitution, of the position of the crown prince. This post is an honorary one; it does not give the person who assumes it any powers and does not make him bear any responsibilities." The King adds that given the difficult regional situation: "I have decided to relieve you of the position of crown prince so that you will have greater freedom and power to move, act, and undertake any missions or responsibilities I assign you."

3. (C) The letter does not mention a new Crown Prince by name, although the King wrote he would give the vacancy his "sincere attention" as guided by the constitution. The Jordanian constitution provides that in the absence of an appointed Crown Prince, the responsibility falls to the King's eldest son -- in this case, ten-year-old Prince Hussein. Given Hussein's youth, the King is required to appoint a regent who would serve, in the event of Abdullah's death, until young Hussein's eighteenth birthday. Despite rumors to the contrary, Royal Court Minister Samir al-Rifai told Charge that the King has no intention of naming a Crown Prince in the near or medium term future. The whole point of "liberating" Hamza from the role was to enable him to develop his own career and more normal relations with a cross section of Jordanians, much as Abdullah believes he benefited when his father removed him from the succession at the age of five. Similarly, he wants none of his brothers or his son to suffer a burden that is symbolic in nature but can sow divisions within the family and society. Nor does he want his son to make assumptions about his future and develop the laziness that can come from the certainty of succession.

4. (C) This is not the first time Jordan has seen an abrupt change in the formal lines of succession. The late King Hussein, on his death-bed, stripped the title from Hassan and passed it to Abdullah. Abdullah himself lost the rank in the 1960s when his father first appointed Hassan to the role. Part of the deathbed realignment included giving the title to Hamza, the eldest son of the then-reigning Queen, Noor. This

step was designed to bridge one of the internal Hashemite fault lines, between the children of Noor and the others. It also appealed to Hussein, whose special affinity for Hamza (whom he called the "apple of my eye") is well known in Jordan.

WHY NOW?

15. (C) While few expected Hamza to ever rule, the timing and motivations of this change have caused intense speculation in Amman, and is likely to ignite some criticism of the King. Hamza is set to complete his undergraduate studies in the U.S. this academic year, and had planned to return to Amman and take up more actively his princely duties. Rifai admitted this was a factor in the King's thinking -- that the imminent return made it important to clarify Hamza's role. This may be true, but not for the reasons provided by palace spin. Hamza for many Jordanians fits an image of the romantic, storybook prince, and an idolized version of his father. (In government offices, the obligatory photos of Hussein and Abdullah are on the walls, but we have seen on more than one secretary's desk a more personal framed photo of the heart-throb, Hamza.) His mannerisms and speech eerily recall those of his father, and his fluent classical Arabic contrasts with Abdullah's more colloquial (accent-inflected) style, learned in the barracks. More significantly, Hamza shows signs of being more interested than Abdullah in shifting sails to populist winds -- undoubtedly a concern for this progressive, Western-minded King. Hamza has absorbed much of his mother's reserved attitude toward U.S. foreign policy in the region, and shows no enthusiasm for the foreign policy courses adopted by Abdullah. On balance, Abdullah may have concluded it was better to make the switch now, before Hamza returned and developed -- simply by being Hamza -- a magnet of loyalty away from Abdullah. The rivalry between two Queens -- Rania and Hamza's mother, Noor -- may also have contributed to the move. The atmosphere in the palace during Noor's recent visit to Jordan, last month, could not have been frostier.

16. (C) Many Jordanians are likely to see this step as premature, at best. There is general respect for Abdullah's ability to steer Jordan through exceptional challenges since Hussein's death. However, the core of his support arises from those with unshakable faith in the acts of his father, including that of appointing Abdullah as successor at the eleventh hour. Several contacts see Abdullah's decision -- which to them comes out of the blue -- as defying the late Hussein's dying wish to bridge family differences, and view the announcement as just the latest salvo against Queen Noor, who retains a reserve of popular goodwill developed during Hussein's last illness. One activist told poloff that she was put off by the way it was handled, noting that the wording of the letter was "insincere." She said the responsibilities of the CP are not defined in the constitution and open to interpretation, and the King has the authority to make it as important as he wants it to be. One human rights activist dismissed the event as a mere sideshow to the real challenges facing Jordan -- regionally and domestically.

17. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

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